

HANIF KUREISHI: A GENERAL STUDY ON COLONIAL DISCOURSE REPRESENTED THROUGH RACE, CLASS, AND SUBJECTIVITY

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ABSTRACT

This paper intends to apply postcolonial theory to study the working of colonial discourse represented through race, class and subjectivity in the works of Hanif Kureishi. How does Kureishi draw a hard line of race and class that separates the immigrants as “others”? How does his childhood experience affect his own psychology which helps him to depict the mindset of the immigrants? The proposed study will strive to unravel all these questions. It also focuses on how and why the immigrant’s presence displaces the cohesiveness of capitalist narratives which, according to traditional Marxist theories, are among the major determinants of national culture in the First World. This work will not only focus on the characters’ movement from one situation to another or with the activities they are threaded with, but also their psychological compulsion. How natural they are to bear the pain of all calamities they encounter? Some of them successfully find their place in the world, and why are they able to do so when others aren’t? How do class differences affect the interactions of the characters and what role does class play in the success or failures of their relationships?

KEYWORDS: Race, Class, Subjectivity, Ambivalence, Hybridity, Mimicry

INTRODUCTION

A people’s mentality is determined by the climatic zone they inhabit, a concept memorably expressed by Mr McBryde, in E. M. Forster’s “*A Passage to India*”: “*All unfortunate natives are criminals at heart, for the simple reason that they live south of latitude 30. They are not to blame, they have not a dog’s chance- we should be like them if we settled here.*” If E. M. Forster is true in his statement then why should we blame the protagonists of Hanif Kureishi? Here is the crisis. Indeed, post-imperial Anglo-Britain appears to have begun a gradual metamorphosis under the ‘tropicalizing’ impact of postcolonialism, and fiction- both postcolonial Anglo-ethnic and post-imperial ethno-English_ has not only recorded this change but also helped to affect it. Contemporary English readers should be irresistibly fascinated by the dynamic vigour and exotic colourfulness of postcolonial writing. It offers them an escape from the agonizing atmosphere of their own post-imperial condition, a chance to experience- at least vicariously in the safety of their own imagination- the pure madness and joy.

Homi K. Bhabha adopted the term “ambivalence” describing this complex structure of attraction and repulsion. It is defined as ambivalent because colonized subject can never completely resist to the colonizer. Kureishi in his works tries to demonstrate the impact of the society on individual and how the colonized subjects are mixed up in the ambivalence of colonial discourse and inflected by other cultures in Bhabhaian terms.

Bhabha's "hybridity" discusses the rise of new transcultural forms occurred by the impact of colonization. He focuses on the colonizer-colonized relations, their interdependence and the mutual construction of subjectivities. For him cultural deviations, codes and system have a construction in the "third space of enunciation". It is an incongruous and ambivalent space in which cultural identity always comes out.

Kureishi's first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* deals with issues and problems of class, race and identity. Karim, the protagonist of the novel, is a youth of two cultures — half Indian and half English looking for identity and fulfillment in the 1970s London. Against a backdrop of class and racial tension, Karim tries to discover who he is, and what he wants while also discovering the true meaning of home and family. According to Bhabha, the colonial relationship generates the seeds of its destruction. Karim's world is full of class and racial tension. The behavior of his white girlfriend's racist father indicates clear existence of racism in multicultural Britain. Indeed Karim shows that he is aware of the source of the problem that he is face-to-face. It is his hybrid identity causing ambivalence in his attitudes towards life and people and confesses the truth while introducing himself at the beginning of the novel... "*My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care-Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere*" (P.3). Characters like Haroon and Anwar create their own spaces, which leave them in "liminality" in Homi Bhabha's terms. Liminality is crucial in celebrating the role of in-between space in which cultural transformation may occur. The English characters in this novel like Eva and her son Charlie are worth mentioning who demonstrate a sense of post-imperial void and try to overcome it by intermingling with the Asian immigrants like Haroon's family. Eva is the best example of social climber. She is an example of the rise of an oppressed Orpington housewife to self-empowered London Socialite and country-designer. In the absence of any concrete and legitimate identity Eva goes to the extent of getting into relationship with Haroon. Haroon becomes an exotic Buddha figure (The Ideal of Eastern Ideology and Philosophy) adored among the English people. The other characters like Anwar, Jeeta and Jamila are also pervaded by fear of violence of racism throughout their life.

His second novel *The Black Album* stresses the reality of cultural dislocation, which confronts not only the original postcolonial immigrant, but also considerably complicates the lives of many generations of his or her British-born offspring. The protagonist Shahid is presented as a sex, drugs, and rock'n'roll-loving Pakistani student. He is intensely troubled by the problem of identity, thus displaying an intriguing affinity to Kipling's Kim. 'Where did he belong?' is a question Shahid asks himself repeatedly. How race and class are grafted into each other is evident in Shahid's word "*feeling like a Britisher in India*". The novel juxtaposes scenes of Shahid's relationship with Deedee Osgood and his ambivalent friendship with Riaz's group. Here Deedee, like Eva, is a victim of post-imperial void as she identifies herself with her student Shahid.

Kureishi, in his screenplay *My Beautiful Launderette*, challenges the complacency of race-relations specialists who seek to subsume cultural difference under the aegis of cultural diversity. He has shown the influence of the postmodern culture on Asian immigrants. They are portrayed negatively as homosexuals and drug dealers. Another critic Stuart Hall, draws out the relationship between race and colonialism in one hand & capitalism and class on the other. Class and race are mutually constitutive and shaping forces behind capitalism. The Asian immigrants in Kureishi's *My Beautiful Launderette*, on one hand, seem to adjust themselves into such a capitalist environment overlooking the racial distinctions. A white working class lad suggests to his Pakistani employer that as a non-white person he should not evict

his Caribbean tenant. The landlord replies: "*I am a professional businessman, not a professional Pakistani.*" As an upwardly mobile immigrant, the landlord refuses to overlook the distinctions that fracture racially oppressed communities as much as racially dominant one. According to Perminder Dhillon-Kashyap, one of the Asian critics, Kureishi in his "*My Beautiful Launderette*", 'has created a new victim, the white fascist- a victim of economic circumstances who is being exploited by petty bourgeois Asian businessmen'. He, however, is unafraid of employing problematic paradigms to politicized effect. Here, he entitles 'Dirty Washing' and, in portraying Omar as an Asian '*underpants cleaner*' in that film he challenges, both figuratively and literally: '*...that we should never discuss our differences*' in public.....and do our dirty laundry in private'(Mercer, p.64). The two outlaws, one is a skinhead and another is Paki, are running this launderette. They take drugs and get laid and are excited to move into a new world. On the other hand characters like Omar and Tania adopt non-heteronormative sexuality creating new home spaces for belonging, and thus unable to adjust with the exclusive neo-liberal capitalist home space created by the host country.

In *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid*, Sammy, his wife Rosie, and his father Rafi are in journey in search of their lives and loves. Rafi is a complex character who we understand to have been an anti-colonial resistance fighter and politician whose commitment also involves the torture of others. Colonialism influences Rosie's relationships with her interracial lovers. Rafi feels claustrophobic. He commits suicide. His death is not the result of guilt or remorse for past actions but simply a function of the realization that he has no place to go. His native country is out to execute him, and postcolonial London is a far cry from the England of his youth. This screenplay emphasizes the ways in which racial meaning, solidarity and identities provide the basis for action.

The screenplay "*London Kills Me*" is an acute portrait of the drug culture in London in the early nineties of post-Tory rule. In the words of Kureishi himself "*..which was a new sort of under-class, I suppose, of kids involved with drugs, ...of different kind of music...the middle class.*" The film is contemporary in its depiction of a young white drug dealer in Notting Hill and his trials and tribulations, most particularly his search for a decent pair of shoes in order to get a 'decent' job. Set in West London it tells the tale of a group of homeless druggtakers and general losers with black humour. Even so, the portrayal of life on London's streets was sympathetic if bleak. The play ends with Sylvie using the ubiquitous railway line to escape from society and Muffdiver. The character of Muffdiver is mimicry of Charlie Hero of "*The Buddha of Suburbia*".

Perhaps, *Intimacy* reveals Kureishi at his most naked and complex. In spite of having "*made it*," Jay is full of fear and hate. He is afraid, but he can't quite say why: "*My childhood still tastes of fear . . . of being kicked, abused, and insulted by other children . . . of annihilation*" (27). He hates his family--"*At times I hated my father. . . . I hate my children, at times, as they must hate me*" (82)--but again he can't explain why. Because of his confused hatred, fear, and rage, "*I shoved strangers on the street. In the tube I pushed someone down the stairs, hoped to be arrested by the police and charged with possession of an uncontrolled mind*" (72). Jay has internalized the fantasies of the black self as a degenerate other; the racist hegemony acts from within as he controls and contains himself, and this fantasy literalizes as he becomes the pathologically coded, monstrous black man in need of containment. So while we can read Jay's leaving of Susan as a simple act of sexism, we can also see how this act--his fear of the "*pulsation of feeling*" (66)--represents the accumulation of years of self-hatred. In the end, Jay fears himself and his family, internalizing the white mainstream's image of him as a violent black male subject who targets white women: "*I could strike her [Susan]*" (25).

In the words of Hanif Kureishi himself in a conversation with Amitava Kumar “of before racism, if you see what I mean. In those days, Indians in England were princes. The idea—although this isn’t quite true—was that the only Indians in England were children of the upper class, who’d been sent to England for school. I remember going to school and being racially abused. I remember my mother going to the school to complain. It was as if she hadn’t realized the consequences of marrying an Indian man. These consequences only worked themselves out later on: suddenly you’ve got this boy and everybody spits on him and you are completely devastated.” Sense of nowhere, devoid of true meaning of life and full of frustration are palpable in his voice.

Other works of Kureishi like “*My Son The Fanatic*”, “*Gabriel’s Gift*”, “*The Body*”, “*Something to Tell You*”, are also not devoid of questions of identity and questions of cultural displacement, race; and notion of community is much abused and probably meaningless. There are catastrophic implications, viciousness, hatred, fury working behind. For Kureishi Community and identity politics is fraught with pitfalls and problems, with conflicts and contentions- issues of representation, cultural politics as well as ‘Englishness’ and community.

CONCLUSIONS

To conclude this paper we have drawn direct references from the text itself and tried to answer all the questions asked in the abstract. There might be endless debate and discussion to analyze the characters in his works. In simple analysis of the complex mindsets, we have taken only the main characters from major writings of Kureishi. In fact, it is hard to avoid fuming stink of race, class, and cultural discourse in his works. It seems Kureishi and his works are predefined, for this purpose only this Nobel laureate has been created. The main protagonists like Karim, Haroon, Anwar, Omar, Sammy, Shahid, and Jay are shot directly by Kureishi through Immigrants-‘Others’ Identity. They can neither accept their own blood culture nor can they accommodate with the occidental. Ultimately, they try to survive in their own created space, in Bhabhaian terms- third space of enunciation. Their cultural identity is coming out in an incongruous and ambivalent form and the in-between space is shown in liminality, a suitable environment for transcultural formation. Another interesting thing is prominent in the characters, other than their psychological compulsion to be attached to the rooted culture, is the childhood experiences. All of them, in one way or another, are influenced by their past. The hybrid persona, Karim along with other major characters like Haroon and Anwar, are the most interesting ones. Since the beginning of the novels and screenplays, the characters are forced to realize that they are immigrants, they don’t belong to this place and they are from different world. In search peace, love, and a little place to live in, their endless journey continues. The concept of unavoidable ‘difference’ is embedded in their psychology. The hybrids like Karim Amir and Jamila survived but others like Rafi failed to do so and lastly attempted suicide. Kureishi is also successful in depicting a capitalist environment in the emergence of a white working class overlooking the race in his *My Beautiful Launderette*. In true sense, Kureishi, in his works, is honest to depict English as well as Asian Immigrants in England. Every year thousands of immigrants move to the UK with huge dreams but most of them are tarnished, and devastated. They are misled, and involved in different illegal activities like drug dealing, sex, and other crimes. They are identified with other human beings, we must say that, by their ethnic background-race, culture, economic class, and religion. And time moves on.

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